

Chicago Sun Times, October 17, 2005

For decades, the federal government has operated a naval hospital and a Veterans Administration hospital just 1-1/2 miles apart in North Chicago.

Now the two centers are being combined. Officials today will hold a signing ceremony for what will become the nation's first joint Navy-VA hospital.

The Great Lakes Naval Hospital will close and a new \$100 million naval facility will be built next to the North Chicago VA Medical Center. Construction is to start in 2007 and be completed in 2009. The old Navy hospital will be torn down.

Operating rooms for the combined hospital will be in the existing VA building, and they will get a \$13 million renovation.

There will be separate entrances for veterans and Navy personnel. But just about everything else will be combined.

"This is an extraordinarily ambitious plan," said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), a Navy reservist who pushed for the merger. "It has been an intensive process that has taken four years."

The naval hospital serves military personnel and their families, while the VA hospital serves veterans. In the merged hospital, they all will share the same doctors.

50,000 veterans in Lake County

"In the waiting rooms, old guys will be sitting next to new recruits," Kirk said. "They're all part of the same military family, just different generations."

In 2000 and 2001, the VA proposed closing the North Chicago VA hospital and sending patients to Chicago.

The merger ensures the hospital's future, said Johnnie Allen, superintendent of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Lake County. "A few years ago, we were about to lose North Chicago," Allen said. "Now it's a secure thing."

Lake County is one of the few areas with a growing population of veterans. The current population, 50,000, is expected to increase to 55,000 by 2010, Kirk said.